Psychiatry is medicine of the brain. The human brain is the most complex organ in the human body and we are far from understanding many of its functions. Because of this, clinical psychiatry has generally concerned itself with the most serious brain disorders which led to major and observable disturbances in human behaviour, such as schizophrenia and dementia. Terms such as “crazy”, “retarded” or “mental disorders” were often used by non-clinicians to describe unfortunate patients suffering from these serious disorders. Treating “crazy behaviour” was perceived as equivalent to what psychiatry was about. This biased and ignorant perception of psychiatry has resulted in the prejudiced attitude towards psychiatry for many years. As a result, the brain was an “untouchable” organ. The brain could never go wrong. Although the brain is a vital organ, brain examination has never been part of a general routine physical examination.

Advances in neurosciences and brain medicine have now begun to change the scope of psychiatry. Treatment of major depression, anxiety disorders, psychosomatic disorders, ADHD and many behavioural problems related to disorders of brain function have rapidly expanded the field of clinical psychiatry. One of the most significant changes in psychiatry in the last decade has been in the field of social psychiatry. Social psychiatry used to be in the backwater of medicine. Though important to the understanding of abnormal human behaviour and a very interesting subject in itself, it was difficult to associate social psychiatry with the biology of the brain. It was difficult to relate the knowledge of brain medicine, e.g. neurobiochemistry, neuro-psycho-pharmacology, neurophysiology to the subject matters of social psychiatry.

Research using new biological tools in the past decade has revolutionised the understanding of normal and abnormal human social behaviour. Presentations by Professors Carter, Porges, Yamawaki and Leonard and other local researchers in this symposium of the Hong Kong Biological Psychiatry represent some of the most important works enabling us to understand human social interaction such as love, attachments, bonding and stress in biological terms. Together, the rapidly accumulating volume of work in this field has created an international impetus towards an emerging field of medicine, which I call “Biological Social Psychiatry”.

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